Labels can be so confusing, not to mention downright misleading; and an excellent case in point is the current critical haste to designate Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., as a "black humorist" and the consequent determination apparently to keep him in that category. In characteristically humorous style Vonnegut has recently objected to the designation: "Bruce Friedman did that. He put the label on me. I don't know what he means. It's just a convenient tag for reviewers. Out I go into the ashcan with Terry Southern and Jack Barth. But those people hated their parents. I like mine." An overview of his published novels, based upon a closer reading of them, would seem to support his demur.

Vonnegut clearly does for his readers, or at least tries to do, what Sherman Krebb's does for Jonah in *Cat's Cradle*. Krebb's is the nihilist who introduces himself as the "National Chairman of Poets and Painters for Immediate Nuclear War." Jonah loans Krebb's his New York apartment and returns from a trip to find it demolished. He confesses that Krebb's action certainly discouraged
him from accepting nihilism as a philosophy. Krebbs is, in the language of Bokonon, a “wrang-wrang, ... a person who steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line, with the example of the wrang-wrang’s own life, to an absurdity” (p. 59). And in this way Krebbs served Jonah’s karass, the team God organizes us into to accomplish his will. Judging from the vision of man that underlies the lines of speculation that Vonnegut would steer us from, we ought to acknowledge him as a member of our karass, but nevertheless one who serves it as a wrang-wrang.

Although, according to Bokonon, a wrang-wrang scarcely acts as a conscious reductio ad absurdum, the writer who shows the absurd conclusion of the course of action knows what he is about. The black humorist shows us the absurdity of the conclusion, but simply invites us to laugh at the inevitable. There is, it seems to me, considerable evidence that Vonnegut would steer us from one course of action because he has something better in mind, although there is a marked inclination of his imagination to dwell on the limitations of the possibilities that lie before us. His tendency to limit the humanly possible so severely is, in fact, an almost desperate plea to the reader to avoid the destructively quixotic. William Lynch in Images and Hope insists that genuine hope depends precisely on our capacity to limit realistically the imagined future.

In exploring the possibilities Vonnegut offers for a different course of action, we can best get an overview of his works by dividing them into two triads. The first is made up of his three most recent novels: God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965), Slaughterhouse-Five (1969), and Cat’s Cradle (1963). The second consists of the three earlier works: Player Piano (1952), Mother Night (1961), and The Sirens of Titan (1959). The order within the triads is obviously not that of publication, but rather of decreasing openness to the possibility of changing the human situation. The reason for distinguishing two triads is to demonstrate what appear to be analogous structures in Vonnegut’s judgment of man and society. The division also suggests the superiority of the more recent works.

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater is, in my estimation, Kurt Vonnegut’s finest novel to date; I base this appraisal principally on what I consider to be the artistic integration of materials, and not simply on my judgment that it is his most positive and humane work. Eliot Rosewater, overcome by combat fatigue and alcohol (no amount, though, seems to make him drunk), is apparently the last of a long line of business moguls, of the variety we have come to know so well — who somehow came to “control all that was worth controlling in America” (p. 21). Expecting to die without an heir, Eliot himself has written a letter that is to be delivered by the Rosewater Foundation to whoever inherits the fortune, describing the effects of the extortion that had produced such wealth: “Thus the American dream turned belly up, turned green, bobbed to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, went bang in the noonday sun” (p. 21).
Eliot really cares about the fortune and how it was acquired. Apparently he gets most of his inspiration, as well as his ideas about what can be done with it, from science-fiction writers, particularly Kilgore Trout, whom he considers to be America’s “greatest prophet” (p. 28). In a drunken intervention at a convention for science-fiction writers that he has crashed, Eliot praises them with these words: “I love you sons of bitches. . . . You’re the only ones with guts enough to really care about the future, who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes do to us” (p. 27). The catalogue of their interests is expectedly like that of Vonnegut himself.

“The Town of Rosewater, the Township of Rosewater, the County of Rosewater, the State of Indiana” (p. 47) is the place where Eliot’s ancestors pirated their wealth. Eliot decides that he must give back something, at least himself, to the descendants of the people who had been enslaved for the Rosewater fortune. “I’m going to love these discarded Americans,” he proclaims, “even though they’re useless and unattractive. That is going to be my work of art” (p. 47). Eliot greets callers at the Foundation office in Rosewater, Indiana with the simple “How can we help you?” (p. 71). The same question is painted on the two windows and door of his office. Such is the situation that produces the book’s great humor, because Eliot knows—and this is his repeated contribution to restroom graffiti—that “if you would be unloved and forgotten, be reasonable” (p. 82).

In fact, Norman Mushari, seeking to wrest the Rosewater millions for Eliot’s forgotten cousin Fred, all but succeeds in proving Eliot insane on this score. Reasonable people are so scarce that it is not hard to see how the rapacious majority can consider them insane. Invited to baptize Mary Moody’s twins, Eliot plans his liturgy in front of Norman Mushari, who would like nothing better than an easy proof of insanity from evidence of a Messiah complex. Eliot’s ruminations, though, are simple and sincere: “Go over to her shack, I guess. Sprinkle some water on the babies, say, ‘Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies—: ‘God damn it, you’ve got to be kind!’” (p. 110).

Kilgore Trout, the aging Jesus-figure who works in a stamp redemption center (his eighty-seven paperbacks are inadequately supporting him), insists that what Eliot did in Rosewater County was far from insane: “It was quite possibly the most important social experiment of our time, for it dealt on a very small scale with a problem whose queasy horror will eventually be made world-wide by the sophistication of machines. The problem is this: How to love people who have no use? . . . If we can’t find reasons and methods for treasuring human beings because they are human beings, then we might as well, as has so often been suggested, rub them out” (p. 210). Trout feels, moreover, that “the main lesson Eliot learned is that people can use all the uncritical love they can get”
Eliot's devotion to volunteer fire departments, another of Vonnegut's personal interests, is, according to Trout, symbolic of his efforts in Rosewater County because volunteer firemen are "almost the only examples of enthusiastic unselfishness to be seen in this land" (p. 211). They are "people treasuring people as people" (p. 211). Although Trout's comments may seem more than ordinarily preachy, he is after all Eliot's prophet, not to mention Vonnegut's mouthpiece; and since he is speaking in a mental hospital, the ironic implication is doubtless that his words can not only be heard, but also understood.

Eliot finally manages to save his fortune, in order to continue his valuable experiment, by accepting as his own all of the children in Rosewater County who are said, lovingly, to be his. A new creation springs from his putative insanity as he sends greetings to all the little Rosewaters back in Indiana. "And tell them," he adds, raising his tennis racket in regal punctuation of his creative proclamation, "to be fruitful and multiply" (p. 217).

We may not be able, Vonnegut is saying, to undo the harm that has been done, but we can certainly love, simply because they are people, those who have been made useless by our past stupidity and greed, our previous crimes against our brothers. And if that seems insane, then the better the world for such folly.

_God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater_ is set in the recognizable present; _Slaughterhouse-Five_, on the other hand, ranges freely over past, present, and future because its principal character, Billy Pilgrim, has come unstuck in time. This happened in 1944 while Billy was wandering behind the German lines after his regiment was all but destroyed during the Battle of the Bulge. It was not until his abduction by the Tralfamadorians, though, that he found out exactly what was going on. Tralfamadorians are so endowed that they see all time and everything at once. The stars in the universe are like "liminous spaghetti" to them, and human beings appear as "great millipedes — 'with babies' legs at one end and old people's legs at the other.' " They see and accept the sameness of time, and thus they would never ask "Why?" questions, the weakness of earthlings. From their superior vantage point in the universe they know that "only on earth is there any talk of free will" (p. 80).

The Tralfamadorian who explains to Billy that he is seeing things as they actually are sounds very much like Philip Traum in _The Mysterious Stranger_. "All time is all time," he says. "It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all . . . bugs in amber" (p. 79). Billy, who had "a paperweight in his office which was a blob of polished amber with three ladybugs embedded in it" (p. 72), is initially frightened at the thought of a world so determined that, given the structure of the moment, there is nothing that one can do change it. And when a Tralfamadorian explains to Billy that the universe ends because a Tralfamadorian test pilot blows it up accidentally,
experiencing with new fuel for flying saucers, Billy predictably wonders if there is no way to prevent it. The answer is just as predictable that “the moment is structured that way” (p. 106). It is only after some experience of unstuck temporal existence, therefore, that Billy comes to learn that among the things he “could not change were the past, the present, and the future” (p. 58).

Part of the sameness that Billy notices in his unstuck pilgrimage is the universality of death and the unavoidability of war. Death ranges from the routine to the bizarre in circumstance. About the only variety in war, though, beyond its magnitude, is the eternal spring of man's imagination of new and more ingenious instruments for killing. Through Roland Weary, the maniacal leader of the group Billy is lost with behind the German lines, Billy is instructed in the richness of man's past imagination: the Spanish thumbscrew, the Iron Maiden of Nuremberg, blood gutters, and triangular blades. When Roland Weary is killed by the Germans, they find in his breast pocket the ultimate of ironies—a bullet-proof Bible, small enough to fit over his heart, and sheathed in steel.

Billy experiences personally the bankruptcy of the modern imagination: the fire-bombing of Dresden, destruction of a magnitude unequalled by anything during the second world war, including the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. One hundred and thirty-five thousand people died in Dresden and eighty-three thousand in a similar bombing of Tokyo, while only seventy-one thousand people died at Hiroshima. The bombing of Dresden, that Billy survived because he was in a concrete slaughterhouse, turned the Florence of the Elbe into a cratered section of the moon's surface and gave Billy the rare opportunity of working afterwards in his first corpse mine.

The Tralfamadorians convince Billy that, if men are like bugs in amber and “all moments, past, present, future always have existed, always will exist” (p. 29), then death is only apparent; so now when he hears that someone has died, he simply shrugs and says “what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is ‘So it goes’ ” (p. 29). Their exhortation to earthlings is that they should “ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones” (p. 107).

Despite the bleakly deterministic tone set by the very structure of the book, by the proliferation of “apparent” deaths, and especially by the Tralfamadorian gospel of “existence in amber,” there is a glimpse of a possibility for man beyond even the somewhat stoical idea of concentrating on the better moments. And it is again Kilgore Trout, now a bitter old man who “keeps body and soul together as a circulation man for the Ilium Gazette” (p. 147), who offers the alternative. (Trout still has not made a penny off of his prose. We are assured that his unpopularity is deserved: “His prose was frightful. Only his ideas were good” (p. 100).) In his The Gospel from Outer Space, Trout proposes the thesis that one of the reasons Christians find it so easy to be cruel is the
Twentieth Century Literature

“slipshod storytelling in the New Testament” (p. 99). A visitor from outer space suggests that the Gospels were intended to teach people to be merciful, even to the least of their brethren, but what they actually taught was this: “Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn’t well connected” (p. 99). The reason for the confusion was that Jesus who did not look like anyone special actually was the “Son of the Most Powerful Being in the Universe” (p. 99). So, since the Jews had obviously made a mistake in the person they had chosen to crucify, Christians decided that they would concentrate on killing people without connections. The space traveler retells the New Testament in such a way that its real message will come across, by having Jesus actually be a bum without connections who is adopted by God only after he dies—a Chritology that sounds more than vaguely like an except from Paul. We have now a Gospel that will protect the people no one cares about. And one volume later, Vonnegut has Kilgore Trout write a book that summarizes the thrust of Eliot Rosewater’s experiment.

Whether stuck or unstuck in it, the action of God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater and Slaughterhouse-Five is set in more or less recognizable time; Cat’s Cradle is set in a future which in many ways is like our present except that the world is ripe for destruction. It is a novel about “the day the world ended,” which is actually the title of the book that the narrator, Jonah, sets out to write, except that The Day the World Ended was supposed to be a Christian account of what important Americans like Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the bomb’s inventors, were doing on the day the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima; whereas Cat’s Cradle turns out to be a Bokononist account of the way the whole world actually does end.

Bokonon is the pronunciation given the name Johnson in the English dialect of San Lorenzo, a small island dictatorship in the Caribbean. And Johnson is the surname of a black Episcopalian from Tobago who with Earl McCabe, a United States marine deserter, attempts to convert the island of San Lorenzo into a utopia. Johnson had for some time been developing the conviction that “someone was trying to get him somewhere for some reason” (p. 76), so when he and McCabe were grounded on San Lorenzo while trying to reach Miami they decided to take charge of the pitiful island. The success of their experiment was built on the principle of dynamic tension between religion and government. Bokonon had actually gotten his idea of “pitting good against evil, and... keeping the tension between the two high at all times” (p. 74) from a Charles Atlas mail-order muscle building school. So Bokonon allowed himself to be outlawed, and the practice of his religion which sanctioned the “tension” to be a capital offense, punishable by the hook. Bokononism was outlawed for the obvious reason that its paraphrase of Jesus’ exhortation to render to Caesar goes like this: “Pay no attention to Caesar. Caesar doesn’t have the slightest idea what’s really going on” (p. 73). Yet everyone, including the dictator, continued to practice Bokononism privately.
Bokonon’s sense of being led somewhere by someone for something provoked the formulation of one of the major tenets of his religion, the belief “that humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God’s will without ever discovering what they are doing” (p. 11). One’s team is called a karass, as I recalled earlier when I suggested that Vonnegut wants very much to be a member of ours. And when Bokonon writes that “man created the checkerboard; God created the Karass,” he means that “a karass ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries” (p. 12). One is not forbidden, moreover, to “discover the limits of his karass and the nature of the work God Almighty has had it do” (p. 12-13); Bokonon simply observes that all “such investigations are bound to be incomplete” (p. 13). It is in seeking to research his book *The Day the World Ended* that Jonah discovers Bokononism, converts, and finally realizes what his “karass has been up to” (p. 190). Thus *Cat's Cradle* becomes a novel of the discovery of purpose, and the purpose itself revealed through the humorous interplay of science and religion is at best black. Vonnegut thus demonstrates his talent for constructing a highly intricate world grounded in whimsy.

While researching his book, Jonah also discovers that before Felix Hoenikker died he had invented ice-nine, a crystal with a melting point of one hundred and thirty degrees Fahrenheit, capable actually of freezing over the entire world, but mercifully developed simply to solidify swamps for invading Marines. While in Ilium making this cheerful discovery, Jonah has his first “sudden, very personal shove in the direction of Bokononism” (p. 34) when he sees a stone angel under mistletoe in a tombstone salesroom. This vin-diti, as the shove is called, is also his first hint about the purpose of karass. At the end of the book, which is also the end of the world, Jonah dreams of climbing Mount McCabe “with some magnificent symbol and planting it there” (p. 190). He realizes that his karass has been working “night and day for maybe half a million years to get [him] up that mountain” (p. 190). It is Bokonon himself, sitting on a rock and composing the final sentence of *The Books of Bokonon*, his feet frosty with ice-nine, who supplies the appropriate symbol. Jonah reads this on a piece of paper Bokonon hands him: “If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who” (p. 191).

The absurdity of a world that destroys itself trying to make war easier and of a religion that professes belief in designed frustration is laid before us with the determined genius of a wrang-wrang. Robert Scholes sums up his reading of Vonnegut's comment on science and religion in this interesting aphorism: “As the scientist finds the truth that kills, the prophet looks for a saving lie.”* On the day the bomb fell on Hiroshima, Felix Hoenikker was making a cat’s cradle with a piece of string from the manuscript of a convict’s
novel about the end of the world; the convict had wanted Felix's advice about what sort of explosives to use. Bokonon insists, moreover, that everything in his books, and therefore certainly in his religion, is foma, that is to say, lies. Yet despite the insane scientists and the perpetrators of deliberate lies I find it hard to accept a reading of the novel that ends with the black humorist hypithesis and nothing else, even though the purpose of Jonah's karass is clearly sketched in terms of a black joke.

It is true that the Fourteenth Book of Bokonon—entitled “What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?”—consists of only one word: “Nothing” (p. 164). Such a statement is of course unredeemingly pessimistic if one ignores the humorous context; it is also, as an observation about reality, like everything else in Bokononism—a lie! Despite the foma one still feels certain that Vonnegut like the Bokononists holds at least one thing sacred, and that is man—“just man” (p. 143). Not the man of pretenses who brings the world to destruction, but the man who realizes his extreme limitations, who acknowledges in the words of a Bokonon calypso that “we do... what we must... muddily do... until we bust” (p. 178). In the last rites of Bokononism, man confesses that he is the “sitting-up mud” God made.

It is the “cruel paradox” of Bokononism though, summed up in the couplet about midgets, that ironically enough reveals Vonnegut’s hope as well as its limits. The couplet goes: “Midget, midget, midget, how he struts and winks, / For he knows a man’s as big as what he hopes and thinks!” (p. 189). The paradox, according to the narrator, consists in “the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it” (p. 189). Prescinding from the foma, we realize that the only hope for man is that he will not lie, that he will accept the fact that he is a moral and religious midget. It is absolutized hope, utopian greed, and absurd pretense that have made the world a “cat’s cradle”; and if man does not limit his perspective, “down will come cray-dull, catsy and all” (p. 18).

In the second triad, composed of Vonnegut’s earlier works, Player Piano is the most explicitly affirmative and in this regard it parallels God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater perfectly. The novel is set in the frighteningly recognizable future, sometime after a second industrial revolution which “devalued routine mental work.”* It is a time supposedly when “know-how and world law [are] getting their long-awaited chance to turn earth into an altogether pleasant and convenient place in which to sweat out Judgment Day” (p. 14). Yet what is actually happening through automation seems to be the ultimate realization of man’s apparent conviction that he “is on earth to create more durable and efficient images of himself, and, hence, to eliminate any justification at all for his own continued existence” (p. 286). From the first player piano, one of man’s earliest and simplest attempts to render himself obsolete, to EPICAC XIV, the complex mechanical heart of the nation buried in Carlsbad Caverns, the process of human self-replacement has been relentlessly steady and inevitable.
Ilium, New York, Vonnegut’s latter-day Troy ripe for destruction, is divided neatly into three districts: “In the northwest are the managers and engineers and civil servants and a few professional people; in the northeast are the machines; and in the south . . . is the area . . . where almost all of the people live” (p. 9). The people, most of whom are capable only of serving in the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps (“Reeks and Wrecks”), are obviously “ripe for a phony Messiah” (p. 93). They have formed a Ghost Shirt Society, based on the Ghost Dance religion of the indians at the end of the last century – their “last, desperate defense of the old values” (p. 273) in the face of the white onslaught. The Ghost Shirt Society is dedicated to the proposition “that the world should be restored to the people” (p. 272). Dr. Paul Proteus, whose overwhelming desire is to know what it is “to belong and believe” (p. 293), is chosen by a small group of left-wing friends to lead the Society’s rebellion.

Their bill of rights deplores “the divine right of machines,” and the truths that the rebels hold inalienable sound unmistakably like Vonnegut’s platform of minimal, but realistic optimism: “That there must be virtue in imperfection, for Man is imperfect, and Man is a creation of God. That there must be virtue in frailty, for Man is frail, and Man is a creation of God. That there must be virtue in inefficiency, for Man is inefficient, and Man is a creation of God. That there must be virtue in brilliance followed by stupidity, for Man is alternately brilliant and stupid, and Man is a creation of God” (p. 285-86).

Moreover, to be human is to do things for sordid reasons, but that is no cause to believe that what one does is not good. It is simply to be human. Defending his resistance to the tyranny of machines because of his alleged resentment of his father, Paul Proteus says during his trial: “The most beautiful peonies I ever saw were grown in almost pure cat excrement” (p. 300).

If the final impression of the novel is of the futility of rebellion, there is at least the affirmation of the virtue in trying to check the progress of lawless technology. The rebellion is a military disaster, and the people of Ilium return immediately to a re-creation of the old nightmare – they celebrate their putative victory by queuing up at a solitary Orange-O machine. They simply return to doing what apparently they do best – replacing themselves. There is honor though in attempting to arrest the process; it is important to be a good indian, fighting against the same odds.

Much of the affirmation of the novel lies in Vonnegut’s sensitive treatment of Paul Proteus; it is one of his most carefully etched characterizations. Depersonalized by the automated society he is a part of, Proteus confirms man’s capacity to find a cause to believe in and a group to belong to – and thus to sense his own worth as a person. And even if it is inevitable that man will continue to try to replace himself, it is worthwhile resisting mindless progress, thereby affirming the value of imperfection, frailty, and even stupidity.
"Mother Night," set in the present and remembered recent past, claims to be the confessions of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., written as he awaits trial in Israel as a war criminal, edited though by Vonnegut. Although Campbell dedicated his confessions to Mata Hari, who "whored in the interest of espionage," Vonnegut rededicates the edited text to Campbell himself, "a man who served evil too openly and good too secretly, the crime of his time" (p. xii). There is a not of unequivocal seriousness about this dedication as well as about the moral that Vonnegut in the Introduction ascribes to the story (the only novel of his he claims to know the specific moral of): "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (p. v).

Howard W. Campbell is an American writer living in Germany before the second world war, married to a German girl. He agrees to become an American agent; his propaganda broadcasts for the Nazi carry coded messages out of Germany to the Allies. The Germans, of course, think he is an American defector. Because of the propaganda he necessarily spread, Campbell realizes and confesses that he has "committed high treason, crimes against humanity, and crimes against [his] own conscience" (p. 34). He is wanted by the Russians who would love to prove American duplicity, by the Israelis for his war crimes, and bizarrely enough by a tip-of-the-right-wing group of American racists who want to canonize him for his patriotism and also, specifically, "for having the courage to tell the truth during the war...when everybody else was telling lies" (p. 70). And last but certainly not least, Bernard B. O’Hare, Americanism Chairman of the Francis X. Donovan Post of the Legion and Vonnegut’s war buddy in Slaughterhouse-Five, acts as Campbell’s personal Fury, having dedicated his life to loathing and hounding him.

Vonnegut’s imagination runs wild, though, through the field of possible American conservatives and produces perhaps his cleverest and zaniest single piece of satire to date. The head of the Campbell-for-Saint movement is Lionel Jason David Jones, publisher of The White Christian Minutemen, ex-propaganda agent for the Germans, “a race-baiter who is ignorant and insane” (p. 61), unlike Campbell himself who by his own admission is neither ignorant nor insane. Jones is ably assisted by his bodyguard, August Krapptauer, “former Vice-Bundesfuhrer of the German-American Bund” (p. 63); his chaplain, Father Keeley, defrocked alcoholic Paulist and ex-chaplain of a second world war gun club organized by Nazi agents; his chauffeur, Robert Sterling Wilson, “the Black Fuehrer of Harlem” (p. 65); and his youth auxiliary, the Iron Guard of the White Sons of the American Constitution.

Anyone as wanted as Campbell would have to hide in the safest possible place; so from the end of the war until he finally turns himself over to the Zionists to be tried for his crimes against humanity, Campbell takes cover in Greenwich Village. His ratty attic overlooks a little private Eden where children play, and he comes to yearn that someone will cry “Olly-olly-ox-in-free” for him — “the sweet mournful cry that meant a game of hide-and-seek was over, that those still hiding were to come out of hiding, that it was time to go home” (p. 30).
One of Campbell's poems entitled "Reflections on Not Participating in Current Events" describes history as "a huge steam roller" (p. 95). It concludes with these clumsy words (Campbell admits that he is a very bad poet): "We went to see where history'd been, / And my, the dead did stink so" (p. 95). Similar to Slaughterhouse-Five, which occupies the central position in the first triad, Mother Night is preoccupied with death and with the loathsome things that people like Campbell do to stay alive. Man, Campbell admits, is "an infantry animal" (p. 142). In his Introduction, Vonnegut insists that another clear moral of the story is: "When you're dead you're dead" (p. vii). So it goes!

Campbell finally realizes that the one thing that made him go "through so many dead and pointless years was curiosity" (p. 167), presumably the curiosity to find out if there is any other point to life than death. Like Billy Pilgrim, though, he is untouched by the hand of death when he so obviously yearns for its surcease. Even when he hopes for death as a war criminal, he is foiled; Frank Wirtanen, his "Blue Fairy Godmother" in American intelligence, comes to his rescue. By then Campbell knows that he must kill himself for his sins against himself. He did not have a totalitarian mind, yet he had pretended to have one, to stay alive. And we are what we pretend to be. Like Cat's Cradle, The Sirens of Titan is set in the future; and although certain aspects of existence on earth are recognizable, this last novel ranges freely in space from earth to Mars to Mercury, back to earth and then finally to Titan. Before the story begins, mankind had been pushing ever outward into space, hoping to find out "who was actually in charge of all creation, and what all creation was all about." They discovered that the universe, like earth, was a "nightmare of meaninglessness without end" (p. 8). Space travel had eventually been suspended, though, because of the accidental discovery of a chrono-synclastic infundibulum, a place "where all the different kinds of truths fit together" (p. 14). Despite the fact that this seems like a desirable discovery, Winston Niles Rumfoord and his dog Kazak who encounter the infundibulum are now scattered through time and space and materialize on earth for only one hour in every fifty-nine days. The rest of the time they are "no more substantial than a moonbeam" (p. 18). The action transpires during the so-called Nightmare Ages on Earth, that period "falling roughly, give or take a few years, between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression" (p. 8), when the president has ordered the resumption of the space program in order to bolster the economy.

Like Cat's Cradle, therefore, this novel explores the question of purpose in a futuristic setting, and the answer as in the former work has a decidedly absurdist flavor. Traversing space as if it were his back yard, precisely because he is chronosynclastically infundibulated, Rumfoord has been able to get a bird's-eye view of what is going on; he is even responsible himself for a certain manipulation of events. When Malachi Constant, Beatrice, and Chrono finally
reach Titan, it is discovered that Chrono's good-luck piece (a four-inch strip of steel strapping from a Martian flame-thrower factory) is the replacement part that Salo needs for his Tralfamadorian spaceship so that he can continue his journey through the universe. The fool's errand that Salo is on is to bring the message "Greetings!" from one rim of the universe to the other. Rumfoord tells it the way it is: "Everything every Earthling has ever done has been warped by creatures on a planet one-hundred-and-fifty thousand light years away. . . . They controlled us in such a way as to make us deliver a replacement part to a Tralfamadorian messenger who was grounded right here on Titan" (p. 297). Long before he knew the ultimate absurdity of life, Malachi as the Martian Unk brought to earth to be the scapegoat in Rumfoord's new religion spoke profounder insight than he could then have realized when he announced: "I was a victim of a series of accidents, as are we all" (p. 229).

Malachi Constant is fond of thinking that "somebody up there" likes him, and the aimlessness that is ultimately disclosed shows how terribly fallible man can be in his judgment of purpose. The novel, as surely as Cat's Cradle, but less subtly, urges us to be much more cautious in assigning reasons for things and events. The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, part of Rumfoord's plan for changing the world in the aftermath of the abortive Martian attack, professes belief that "there is nothing more cruel, more dangerous, more blasphemous that a man can do than to believe . . . that luck, good or bad, is the hand of God" (p. 252). Man consistently and foolishly, Vonnegut insists, attributes divine purpose to events that are either pure chance or human folly. But this is not to say that there is no purpose in existence, that all is a joke. Beatrice Rumfoord and Malachi, unwilling partners in marriage, had only during the last year of their lives come to love one another. "It took us that long." Malachi admits, "to realize that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved" (p. 313).

In each of his novels Vonnegut offers us some alternative, however slim, to the path of disaster that we seem consistently to prefer. There is hope, though, only if man respects the limits for truly humane contributions to his fellow man.

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2Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Cat's Cradle (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), p. 58. All references to Vonnegut's novels, after the initial citation, will be noted in the text.
5Robert Scholes, "Mithridates, he died old": Black Humor and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," The Hollins Critic, 3 (October 1966), 8.
3549 quotes from Kurt Vonnegut: 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.', 'Those who believe in telekinetics, raise my hand.', and 'I want to stand as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center.'

“...We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.

― Kurt Vonnegut, Mother Night."